

HOW TO WIN OVER TEMPTATION

During the American Civil War, Union troops had taken a small town in South Carolina. The fleeing Confederates had left so much gun powder behind that the Union troops decided to dump most of it in an old creek bed. One Union soldier played a joke on his friends. He took a handful of the powder after dumping it and took it back to his cooking fire and threw it in the fire causing it to spark, to the delight of everyone around. The other troops, looking for some entertainment, did the same, scooping up handfuls of the powder and carrying it to their cooking fires where they exploded it amid much shouting and laughter. With each handful they grew more careless, and left numerous crisscrossing trails of powder running back to the ravine. Sergeant Theodore Upson of the 100th Indiana had just started his coffee boiling when he saw "a little flash of powder running along the ground." Then there was a tremendous explosion. The ground shook for miles. The force of the blast destroyed several houses and shattered nearly every window in town. A storm of shrapnel rained down for a half-mile in every direction. Many people were killed all because of the carelessness of the soldiers. If you play with fire, eventually you will be burned.

Proverbs 6:27-28 Can a man scoop fire into his lap without his clothes being burned? 28 Can a man walk on hot coals without his feet being scorched?

Today we are continuing in our series looking at the Book of James. In the first chapter, James talks about two different kinds of testing. One is called trials, we talked about that a few weeks ago. The other is called temptation. Both of them come from the same Greek word PEIRASMOS. How are they different? Trials are situations God uses in order to help us grow. Temptations are situations the devil uses to cause us to sin.

James 1:12 Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him. 13 When tempted, no one should say, "God is tempting me." For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; 14 but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. 15 Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death. 16 Don't be deceived, my dear brothers. 17 Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. 18 He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created.

I can withstand anything, except temptation -- Oscar Wilde

God wants you to know how the devil operates, how he tempts. The only thing you can say about the devil that's good is this: he's consistent. He's been using the same old bag of tricks for 2000 years and longer. It's very easy to discover his process. Temptation is a process, never just a one-time act. James outlines the four steps that the devil uses in order to tempt you. What are the 4 Ds of temptation?

DESIRE (vs 14a)

James 1:14 but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire...

The first step of temptation is desire. Most desires are OK. When the body needs water, we get thirsty. When the body needs food, we get hungry. God gives us these desires, and there is nothing wrong with them. However, any desire out of control becomes destructive.

Satan loves to take routine desires and turn them into runaway desires. You become consumed and obsessed by it: food, work, having fun, sex, money. When legitimate desires grow out of control they become a problem. Temptation starts on the inside. It is often the fulfillment of a legitimate desire in the wrong way at the wrong time. It always starts with the desire.

There is a story told about a little boy in a grocery store. A grocer saw the boy standing near an open box of peanut butter cookies. "Now then, young man," said the grocer "What are you up to?" "Nothing," replied the boy. "Nothing." Said the grocer "It looks to me like you were trying to take a cookie." "You're wrong, mister, I am not trying to take a cookie. I am trying not to."

DECEPTION (vs 14b)

James 1:14 ...he is dragged away and enticed

James uses a couple of terms here that could come straight out of Bass Pro Shop. The word DRAGGED AWAY is a hunter's term which literally means to be snared in a trap. The word ENTICED is a fisherman's term which means to be lured by bait. The secret of great fishing is in the bait. The right kind of bait for the right kind of fish. E.g. getting the Rapala lures last week.

What kind of bait does the devil use on you? He knows your weakness. He knows you inside and out. He knows what turns you on and off. He knows what you will fall for. He hides his hook in his bait and the bait appeals to your weakness. The crazy thing is that often we see the hook and we know it's a temptation but we keep right on nibbling.

Temptation always starts with the desire but then Satan moves to deception. Temptation always looks better than it really is.

Maybe you have heard the story of the boy who went to the priest for confession. He said to the priest, "Bless me Father for I have sinned... Father, I had bad thoughts..." The priest asked "Did you entertain them?" The boy replied "no Father... but they sure did entertained me!"

DISOBEDIENCE (vs 15a)

James 1:15 Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin...

What begins in the mind does not simply stay there. It results in an action. It starts in your imagination (in your thoughts) but then moves into actions. The devil knows that if he can get your attention then he can get you.

I have heard people before ask the question, "What's the danger in a little harmless fantasy?" What starts in your mind eventually comes out in your life. It always begins in the imagination. What you flirt with, you will fall for. That's the whole purpose behind television advertising. They try to get you to imagine something. They know if they can get it in your imagination they've got you. If that didn't work nobody would advertise. The Bible says what starts in your mind eventually comes out in your lifestyle. Desire leads to deception, deception leads to disobedience.

DEATH (vs 15b)

James 1:15 ...and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.

Disobedience leads to death. Sin always separates. It always has consequences. The wages of sin is death. What is death? Death is separation.

Isaiah 59:1-2 Surely the arm of the LORD is not too short to save, nor his ear too dull to hear. 2 But your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear.

When we give in to temptation it moves us away from God. It hurts our relationship with Him. If death means separation than life means the opposite, it means connection.

James 1:12 Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him.

God has given us freedom of choice. I can choose to live any way I want to. But I am not free to choose the consequences of those choices. I can choose to follow my own way which leads to separation from God or I can choose to live God's way which leads to life. I am free to make choices, but I'm not free to choose the consequences of those choices.

At school Joe was good in arithmetic but poor in spelling. Mabel was a fine speller and sat opposite him. On examination day Joe forgot many words, and the tempter said, 'Look on Mabel's paper; she has them right!' So Joe copied several, and the teacher saw him. She intended to talk to him after school, for she always thought Joe was honest. Just then the boy who was collecting the papers came to Joe's desk, and she saw him tear his up, and say, "I haven't any!" She knew he had decided to take a zero rather than hand in a dishonest paper. When the school closed, she called Joe and said, "I saw your struggle, and am proud of a boy who conquered temptation." Joe understood that the penalty of failing the test was less than the penalty of choosing to sin.

Notice that this scripture we read this morning starts with the word BLESSED. Joy and happiness comes from having your life under control. Bad habits can devastate your life, they only lead to bondage. When you learn how to say NO to temptation it produces joy and freedom in your life. It leads to abundant life.

So how do you learn to say NO to temptation? Here are five principles;

1. Be Realistic

James 1:13 When tempted...

Like trials, temptations are inevitable. Have you ever met a pious person who says, "I thank God that in my 42 years on earth I have never been tempted!" That's what you get when you cross a crocodile and an abalone -- a crock of baloney. Everybody's tempted. You never get too old for it. You never overcome it by getting too spiritual. The more you grow toward the Lord, the more you're going to be tempted. It's a fact of life. All of us are tempted.

1 Corinthians 10:13 No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.

Temptation is common to man. That means everybody faces it. Don't be surprised by temptation. Remember that it is not a sin to be tempted. It is a sin to give in to temptation.

Hebrews 4:15 For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are--yet was without sin.

Jesus was perfect. He was tempted but He never gave in to it. It is not a sin to be tempted. I meet a lot of Christians who are intimidated by temptation. They think "How could I have such a thought?" You are human. Temptation proves you're human, not that you're evil. The more committed you are the more you're going to be tempted.

2. Be Responsible

Accept responsibility. We love to blame people for our problems, even God. Just in case you want to blame God for your temptations, James makes it very clear;

James 1:13 ...no one should say, "God is tempting me." For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone;

You can summarize American history into two great movements: the passing of the buffalo and the passing of the buck -- Will Rogers

We see a growing sense of entitlement in our society today. More than ever we live in a culture of irresponsibility. Blame the government, blame the environment, blame heredity, blame your parents, blame your spouse, blame the devil, even blame God. Some people believe that, since God is all powerful and all knowing, that everything that happens in life must be His will. Therefore, if I am tempted, it must be God's will. That is called blaming God.

Do not make bad choices and then blame them on God. God does not tempt. He never contradicts His word. God is not going to tell you one thing and have the Bible say something different. Be responsible. Don't blame God and don't blame other people. It's a sign of immaturity. The fact is I bring most of my problems onto myself. So do you. Stop making excuses and deal with your habits and issues.

3. Be Ready

When temptation comes, be ready. Be prepared for it.

2 Peter 3:17 Therefore, dear friends, since you already know this, be on your guard so that you may not be carried away by the error of lawless men and fall from your secure position.

Mark 14:38 Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak.

Ephesians 6:11 Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes.

We need to be ready and prepared for temptation. Temptation does not warn you in advance. Most people are not really aware of their weaknesses. The Bible says

1 Corinthians 10:12 So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!

I think of Bobby Leach who went over Niagara Falls in a barrel and came out unharmed. A couple of days later he slipped on an orange peel and broke his leg. It's the little things in life that kill us. Be ready, don't be deceived.

4. Be Refocused

If temptation begins with our inner thoughts then changing what we think about is the key to overcoming it. This is the principle of replacement, the key to overcoming temptation. You do not overcome temptation by resisting the thought but by refocusing the thoughts. Change your attention. Turn your attention on something else.

Philippians 4:8 Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable--if anything is excellent or praiseworthy--think about such things.

Focus your mind on the goodness of God. Why? Because the more you fight a feeling the more it grabs you. Don't focus on what you do not want. Focus on what you do want. Get your eyes off the negative and onto the positive.

Are you a worrier? It because you are focusing on problems. Remember, whatever gets your attention, gets you. Whatever you resist, persists. Refocus your attention.

Psalms 118:24 This is the day the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.

Are you depressed? You do not get out of it by looking at yourself and telling yourself what you are. Remember instead who God is. You can't fight a feeling. But if you ignore it, you weaken it.

Psalms 34:1-3 I will extol the LORD at all times; his praise will always be on my lips. 2 My soul will boast in the LORD; let the afflicted hear and rejoice. 3 Glorify the LORD with me; let us exalt his name together.

Don't try to argue with the devil. He has had thousands of years of experience and he is a lot better at it than you are. When temptation calls, drop the receiver. Refocusing may mean physically removing yourself from the situation. If you don't want to get stung, get away from the bees. Maybe you need to change the channel on the TV. Maybe you need to walk out of that movie. Maybe you need to change jobs. Maybe you need to change a car pool. Joseph was in a tempting situation and he left his coat and ran. If you have to leave your coat, leave your coat.

A mother told her son not to go swimming. However, when he came into the house his mother noticed that his hair and bathing suit were wet. "Johnnie," his mother scolded, "I told you not to go swimming." "I couldn't help it mom," he said "The water looked so good." The mother asked "So then why did you take your bathing suit with you?" The boy answered "In case I was tempted." If you don't want to be tempted, don't take your bathing suit! Temptation usually comes in through a door that has deliberately been left open.

5. Be Reborn

The single most important principle in breaking bad habits and getting control of your life is to let God have control of it. Get Him in your life so He can start changing your character through the power of the Holy Spirit. You will not be able to say no to temptation until you first learn to say yes to God. You need His power in your life.

What is your most vulnerable area this morning? What is your weak spot? God knows it. The devil knows it. Have you ever figured it out? Where do you lack of self-control? Is it your temper? Is it your appetite? Is it spending? Is it your words? Is it substance abuse? Is it lust? Figure it out and then admit it to God. Say, "God, You know the areas I've fallen in. I've stumbled. I want a clean slate. I want to start over. Get forgiveness. That's available. Then salvation is the first step in victory over temptation. Ask Christ to come into your life and give you the power.

Get into worship. Filling your mind with the goodness and power of Christ is a key to overcoming temptation. Not just worship once a week at church, but worship in your home, in your workplace if possible, in your car when you are driving, everywhere you go.

Get into a small group. They are a place where you can be accountable. Where you can share your struggles with others and have them help you stay on the right path.

Get into God's word. The Bible says that the truth set us free. Read it and meditate on it. The more you know it and have it inside you the easier it is to turn to it in times of trouble.

Manfred von Richthofen was a famous German fighter pilot during the First World War. He was better known as the Red Baron because he flew a distinctive a red Fokker aircraft. During the war he shot down more planes than any one else, his known kill tally was 80. On 21st April 1918, he began chasing a Canadian plane that had fired at another German plane piloted by a close friend. When the novice pilot realized the Red Baron was after him he tried to escape the battle by heading back over the river Somme behind the Allied lines. But Richthofen pursued him. He did not notice that he was diving too low over enemy territory. He also didn't notice the other Canadian pilot that came up behind him to help his comrade. We may never know if it was a shot from the ground or a shot from the other pilot that killed Richthofen. What we do know is that he died from Target Fixation. He was so focused on the target that he lost sight of everything else around him. As one eyewitness put it, he died because he made the mistake pursuing that plane "too long, too far, and too low into enemy territory."

To many Christians suffer from Target Fixation. They have followed temptation for too long, too far, and too low into enemy territory, and because of it have been shot down.